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THE ENDURING LEGACY

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Joseph Lelyveld is a staff writer for this magazine.

By Joseph Lelyveld

A YOUNG BRONZE GOD OF WAR." JOHN DENTON FIRST HEARD that phrase in harangues and pep talks when he was going through officers' training as a marine. It resurfaced in his mind a generation later at a sun-dappled Fourth of July family picnic. What brought it back was an encounter there with a young soldier who seemed as eager for action as Denton himself had been when he took command of his first platoon in Bravo Company, Seventh Engineer Battalion, at Danang, South Vietnam, in 1966.

Denton, now an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, hadn't realized that soldiers like that were still being turned out. Trying to express how moved and transfixed he felt when he saw the young man, Denton described a vision: "He was 21, if that, and he took me right back to what I was. He was ready, and he was going to do it, almost to the point of saying, 'I sure hope they've got a war going someplace.' It made me feel good, but at the same time I wanted to go over and put my arm around him and say, 'Hey, have you got about five minutes? I want to tell you a few things.'"

Denton never had that conversation. If he had spoken, he would have talked, he said, about the responsibilities rather than the glory of command, about the strength a leader derives from his men, about devotion to them as an element of valor.

Instead, this F.B.I. man was toiling late in the den over his garage in Knoxville, Tenn., pouring it all into a novel — not about the country called Vietnam, or the questions represented by the war, or what happened to the veterans when they returned to an ungrateful, even hostile, nation. The country and questions and aftermath were all incidental. What he needed to explore was the nature of the camaraderie of men at war, almost to the exclusion of these other matters.

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